

# bmj.com news roundup

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## Senators block Bush's nominee to head FDA

Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York and Patty Murray of Washington state have blocked President Bush's nomination of Andrew von Eschenbach to head the Food and Drug Administration.

Dr von Eschenbach, who is also head of the National Cancer Institute, has been acting commissioner of the FDA since September 2005. During President Bush's years in office the FDA has had a permanent head for only a few months.

The two Democrat senators said they acted because of the FDA's failure to decide to make the emergency contraceptive levonorgestrel (known as Plan B) available without a prescription.

In a joint statement they said, "For more than two years the FDA has dragged its feet on making a decision, putting ideology over science. It is past time for the FDA to stop dragging its heels and make a decision on Plan B" (<http://clinton.senate.gov/news/statements/>).

The senators' action blocks the Senate voting on Dr von Eschenbach's nomination. The Democrat senator Edward Kennedy, of Massachusetts, said that a decision had to be reached on Plan B before Dr von Eschenbach's nomination could be confirmed.

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

## Foundation trusts turn in strong financial performance

England's foundation trusts are generating major cash surpluses for reinvesting in care of patients at a time when the NHS overall is struggling financially, says a report by an independent body.

Monitor, the independent regulator of foundation trusts, has given these NHS organisations, which have greater financial and operational freedom than other trusts, a clean bill of health for their finances, in a new report of



## German hospital doctors strike over pay

More than 22 000 doctors in most of Germany's 36 university and state hospitals have decided to strike indefinitely from 16 March. The hospital doctors' association the Marburger Bund announced that an overwhelming majority of their members voted in favour of a strike, which so far has begun only in eight university hospitals. But it will expand to other regions, the Marburger Bund said.

Most non-emergency treatments and operations in the hospitals have been postponed. Emergency care and all treatment for potentially life threatening diseases, such as cancer, will continue. Discontent has been growing since last December when 2200 doctors from the Charité University Medical Centre (pictured above) went on strike.

The doctors are demanding a 30% pay rise and better working conditions, with regular hours and paid overtime. Previous strike actions, including a week's walk-out in August 2005, did not have the desired effect.

Annette Tuffs *Heidelberg*

their performance in the nine months to December 2005.

Only one of the 32 foundation trusts—University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust—had a deficit. Its board, overseen by Monitor, is currently implementing a plan for financial recovery and is in discussions with Monitor about how to turn around its £29.4m (£42.3m; \$51.6m) deficit.

Monitor's report says that foundation trusts had an aggregate deficit of £9m on a total income of £5bn, but if University College London Hospitals was removed from calculations, the remaining 31 trusts generated a £20m surplus over the nine months.

Adrian O'Dowd *London*

*NHS Foundation Trusts—Nine-Month Report for Period 1 April 2005 to 31 December 2005* is available at [www.monitor-nhsft.gov.uk](http://www.monitor-nhsft.gov.uk).

## MEPs fight to reinstate EU health funding

A battle is looming between members of the European parliament and European Union governments over the level of European funding for the health sector for the next seven years.

Various organisations are warning that the budget cuts that EU leaders made shortly before Christmas could sound the death knell for many public health policies funded by the EU (*BMJ* 2006;332:257, 4 Feb).

At stake is the level of funding that the EU should give to health and consumer protection programmes between 2007 and 2013. The European Commission had initially proposed an overall figure of €1.2bn (£0.8bn; \$1.5bn), of which just under

€1bn would be allocated to health programmes.

The figure for 2007 was reduced to below this year's level of spending by European prime ministers in December.

Reacting to the cutbacks, members of the European parliament voted last week to raise EU expenditure on health programmes to €1.5bn over the seven year period.

The outcome of the budgetary battle will depend on difficult negotiations between the European parliament and EU governments in the coming weeks.

Rory Watson *Brussels*

## European group targets overuse of antibiotics

A new pan-European network aimed at addressing the growing problem of resistance to antibiotics used to treat lower respiratory tract infections begins work this week.

The project—genomics to combat resistance against antibiotics in community acquired lower respiratory tract illness in Europe, or GRACE—brings together partners from 14 countries and involves 13 primary care networks. It is coordinated by the University of Antwerp in Belgium and funded with a grant of €11.5m (£8m; \$14m) from the European Union.

Lower respiratory tract illness is the most common group of conditions treated in primary care in Western countries. Acute bronchitis affects more than 16 million people a year in Europe, and between 70% and 90% of these people are given a prescription for antibiotics to treat it.

The project will examine the very different patterns in antibiotic use and resistance across Europe and seek to explain why countries such as Spain and France have high levels of both whereas countries further north in Europe have a lower incidence.

It will also look to establish guidelines for doctors on when to use antibiotics.

Rory Watson *Brussels*

For more information see [www.grace-lrti.org](http://www.grace-lrti.org).